

TOWN OF ABINGDON
SPECIAL CALLED COUNCIL MEETING
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 17, 2007 – 5:30 P.M.
DOWNSTAIRS MEETING ROOM
MUNICIPAL BUILDING

A special called meeting of the Abingdon Town Council and representatives of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) was held on Wednesday, January 17, 2007 at 5:30 P.M. in the Downstairs Meeting Room at the Municipal Building. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposed project for the Exit 17 area.

A. ROLL CALL

Members of Council present: Mayor Lois H. Humphreys
Mr. Robert M. Howard, Vice Mayor
Mr. Edward B. Morgan

Members of Council absent: Dr. French H. Moore, Jr.
Mrs. Cathy Lowe

Comprising a quorum of the Council

Administrative Staff: Gregory W. Kelly, Town Manager
C. M. Vernon, Jr., Public Works Director
Jim Smith, Town Engineer
Tony Sullivan, Police Chief
Linda F. Wilson, Town Clerk

Visitors: Jim Givens, VDOT District Administrator
Ken Brittle, VDOT District Construction Engineer
Steve Buston, VDOT Residency Administrator, Abingdon
Rick Marano, VDOT, Assistant Location & Design Engineer,
Bristol District Office

Ken Brittle, VDOT District Construction Engineer, reported that the plan for Exit 17 is currently being designed in house at the central office. The itemized cost for the project includes: Preliminary Engineering, \$6.998 million; Right-of-Way, \$19.910 million; and Construction, \$71 million for a total amount of \$98.402 million at today's rate. However, the current estimate of \$103 million is based on the proposed 2012 construction date. A funding shortage of \$28 million remains for that date. Interstate funding is allocated for all statewide projects; therefore, Exit 17 is in competition with all others.

James Givens, VDOT District Administrator, explained that of the \$28 million funding shortage, there is currently a previous allocation in the amount of \$7.964 million. Funds will accumulate until such time as there is enough to acquire right-of-way. From a funding perspective that will probably be 2010.

Mr. Morgan noted that the map for the proposed project indicates that the Interstate will be widened and the exits rebuilt. He expressed concerns regarding traffic that flows from Cummings Street onto Route 75 and to the South Holston Lake area. Previous discussions by Council had included the possibility of building a bypass around Town near the Exit 14 area. He asked if it would be feasible to look at that prospect rather than rebuilding Cummings Street to handle that traffic.

Mr. Brittle replied that VDOT is aware that most of the traffic at that location is local. In his opinion, there is a need for both the bypass and the Exit 17 project. However, Interstate funding cannot be used for primary arterials.

Mayor Humphreys asked if there is a possibility of making some improvements to Route 75 before 2010. Mr. Brittle replied that the bottleneck exists underneath the Interstate bridges. It will be necessary to replace the bridges and widen the lanes underneath it in order to eliminate the bottleneck.

Mr. Morgan suggested the possibility of a turning lane for ingress traffic to the Interstate. Mr. Brittle replied that could be done, but it would be necessary to take caution. That could relieve one movement and at the same time create another problem. Mr. Brittle will review that possibility. He added that funding for such a project through the Town's the urban allocation funds. Mr. Givens noted that the advantage of including Route 75 in conjunction with the Exit 17 project is that urban, primary, and secondary funding might not be required.

Mr. Morgan noted that the existing situation is unacceptable. He asked if there were alternatives that might help manage the traffic flow while waiting for the project to begin. He reviewed the data that was submitted by Police Chief Tony Sullivan which indicated the number of traffic collisions and vehicle damage that had occurred on Cummings Street from 2003 – 2006. He felt there might be too many access points to the fast food restaurants. Mr. Brittle agreed that there are too many left turn lanes. However, he felt that owners would complain if motorists were denied access to their restaurants. He added that it is sometimes possible to solve one traffic problem, but another one might be created.

Mr. Morgan noted that the meals and lodging tax provides as much revenue as property tax does. He suggested that a general discussion be held with the merchants who are affected to see where it lies. The current situation is not good for their business either. Mr. Morgan gave examples of a compromise approach regarding the McDonalds area. He asked if it would be feasible to extend the lane of the southbound exit of the Interstate. Mr. Brittle replied that is a possibility and they will look into it. He added that their current design for the project thus far addresses every issue that has been mentioned.

Discussion included locations of access points, placement of concrete medians to prevent left turns, relocation of the entrance to Washington Crossing Shopping Center, and police presence during high volume traffic times. Chief Sullivan noted that the major cause for collisions is inattention. Mr. Brittle added that turning signals do create a safe turning movement; however, they also increase the possibility for another type of collisions.

Chief Sullivan noted that the majority of angle collisions are not made by turns from the street into a facility, but from left turns out of a facility and onto the street. He felt it would help to eliminate left turns out of private facilities.

Discussion to prevent left hand turns included: limit to certain times of the day, enforcement, posting signs, and physical barriers. Chief Sullivan noted that enforcement is hazardous because there is no location for police personnel to be visible, yet safely out of the flow of traffic, and to ultimately get back into traffic to track down a motorist. Sometimes it's necessary for a second officer to act as a deflector while the first officer works the wreck. Mr. Brittle noted that the ramps will be relocated. They would really like to do something now that would work in the overall scheme, but he felt that would continue to magnify quickly.

Mr. Givens noted the positive side. He advised that the Transportation Board has designated the Exit 17 project as the top priority in the district of the Interstate system. The fact that it would not begin until 2010 or 2012 is regrettable, but the funding is not available.

Greg Kelly, Town Manager, asked how the Town gets in line for funding. Mr. Givens replied, by traffic volume. You get more bangs for the buck if you solve a safety problem in a higher traffic volume area. Mr. Kelly asked if there is a way to get on the fast track to get the project done sooner. Mr. Givens replied that under the existing funding levels that's pretty bleak.

Mr. Howard suggested the possibility of moving traffic from Porterfield Highway to Main Street and onto Stone Mill Road, under the Interstate to Vance's Mill Road, and onto Route 75. Mr. Givens replied that route is part of the urban system and would require the Town to pay for it, but he suspected it would work.

Further discussion included the grade crossing on the railroad, the lack of distance to build a bridge, and the environmental cleanup of an oil company site.

Mr. Givens advised that he is positive about the project and feels that it could be advertised for construction in five or six years. He felt that given the timeframe for the design plans and acquisition of right-of-way, that's not a bad schedule. He added that it will take at least two years or more to complete the project.

Mr. Kelly asked if the possibility of building an exit off Stone Mill Road has ever been considered. Mr. Brittle replied that in order to build an exit, it would be necessary to omit an existing one. Mr. Brittle explained the process that will be necessary to rebuild the Interstate bridges.

Mr. Morgan noted that earlier in the meeting, methods by which to better manage the traffic was discussed. He asked if VDOT could design a plan, or if the request should be made to a private engineering firm. Mr. Brittle replied that VDOT personnel and Town Staff can together determine that. He added that he is encouraged that the Exit 17 project is included in a 6-year plan and is only \$28 million short.

Chief Sullivan expressed concerns regarding the possibility of medians being installed in the center turn lane. He advised that when accidents occur it's necessary for the police, fire department, and rescue vehicles to utilize that lane.

Mr. Brittle noted that the plan is designed for the Washington Crossing Shopping Center and Cook Street access to match at one location. He felt the project will leave Cummings Street in a safe condition for 22 years plus. Mr. Givens added that they are being realistic and didn't intend to sound negative in the fact that the funding is not currently available.

Mr. Morgan expressed appreciation for the update and understood the realities. He asked how to proceed with investigating a practical and realistic approach in the meantime. Mr. Brittle replied that they would discuss the situation with their traffic engineer to determine what might be possible.

Rick Marano, VDOT Assistant Location & Design Engineer, Bristol District Office, advised that the left lane turns could be controlled, but would the businesses accept that. He reiterated a previous point that was made by Mr. Morgan, how much do accidents take away from the businesses.

Mr. Givens added that much of the development in that area started thirty years ago and is getting closer to its functional life.

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Mr. Kelly presented the following for Council's consideration: A RESOLUTION OF THE TOWN OF ABINGDON, VIRGINIA TO EXPRESS CONCERN TO THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION ABOUT THE UNSAFE DRIVING CONDITIONS OF THE EXIT #17 AREA OF THE TOWN OF ABINGDON.

Mr. Morgan made the motion to approve the resolution as modified, noting the addition of **COMMONWEALTH TRANSPORTATION BOARD** in the heading; and the addition of paragraph #11 to read: **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Council of the Town of Abingdon does hereby request the commonwealth Transportation Board to allocate all funds necessary for the Virginia Department of Transportation to fully fund and carry out this project in its current six (6) year plan for modification of Exit #17 of interstate 81. Mr. Howard seconded the motion.
(copy attached to and made a part of these minutes)

The roll call vote was: Mr. Morgan – Aye Mr. Howard – Aye Mayor Humphreys – Aye

The motion carried.

Lois H. Humphreys, Mayor

January 17, 2007